Horses In the Roundhouse...Cause for Concern?

By Jason Turner, Extension Horse Specialist

In the 2014 New Mexico Legislature, there were nine or more bills directly related to horses/equines. Of those, House Bill 120 dealt with removing equines from the traditional legal definition of livestock. Some animal rights activists have previously used this tactic in an attempt to prevent the processing of equines for meat. Whether this bill intentionally sought to reclassify equines as non-livestock or not, actions such as this should be cause for concern among the New Mexico equine industry as well as the entire livestock industry within the state. This is because such a legal action could negatively impact countless New Mexicans who derive their livelihood from livestock.

According to the American Horse Council, the equine industry has a $759 million impact on the New Mexico economy, and it is responsible for employment of over 45,000 people. Furthermore, many of New Mexico’s “claims to fame” are due to the rich tradition of accomplishments by renowned horsemen and women and the equines they raised, cared for, and trained. New Mexico always has been “horse country”, and equine ownership is an important part of many New Mexicans lives. Simply put, the equine industry is a vital part of our State’s economy and culture.

“Is a Horse More Like a Cow than Like a Dog?” Answering this simple question is the focus of a lesson for youth prepared by the Animal Welfare Council. The lesson material is suitable for engaging adults to think more deeply on the question, and to understand why equines are livestock and not pets. Merriam-Webster defines livestock as “farm animals that are kept, raised, and used by people” and pet as “a domesticated animal kept for pleasure rather than utility.” There is no doubt that some owners may treat their horse (or pig or chicken) like a pet rather than livestock; however, changing the legal definition of any of these from livestock to non-livestock would have severe and devastating consequences for all New Mexicans.

Many services indispensable to protecting the health and welfare of equines is a direct result of their classification as livestock. A legal classification of equines as non-livestock would mean the loss of state and federal resources that benefit the livestock industry and livestock owners. Examples of these valuable resources include: funding to conduct research to treat or cure diseases, promote animal well-being, and improve management practices; professionally trained animal care staff, veterinarians, laboratories, and law enforcement officers and regulations that provide for disease surveillance in
livestock and the means to quarantine suspected carriers at the state and federal level; and qualification for federal loans and other assistance for livestock owners that experience a financial loss as the result of a natural disaster. As an agricultural enterprise, equine stables, farms, and other similar operations are provided certain protections under New Mexico’s Right To Farm Act that are not extended to companion animal species. Fortunately, in New Mexico, equines fall under the statewide jurisdiction of the New Mexico Livestock Board to investigate allegations of and enforce laws concerning animal cruelty and neglect for livestock. The New Mexico Department of Agriculture also provides essential services to equine livestock through the Veterinary Diagnostic Services Laboratory and the Division of Agricultural and Environmental Services which is responsible for feed inspection.

Without consideration of the impacts mentioned above, the redefining of equines as non-livestock could shift the burden of providing these essential services from the state and federal level to the local municipality or county government level. In many instances, these governmental units do not have the trained staff or financial resources necessary to insure the welfare of equines in their jurisdiction. Furthermore, without some statewide standards and protections, local ordinances could create “roadblocks” hindering equine ownership and equine activities which would diminish the economic value of the equine industry within New Mexico. Since there are several diseases that may commonly occur among livestock species, the loss of resources to test, monitor, and restrict the movement of diseased equines could put New Mexico’s food animal (primarily beef, dairy, and sheep) industries at risk for disease outbreaks that could result in trade sanctions from other states or countries.

In closing, the classification of equines as livestock in New Mexico is an essential requirement for many owners in the state. This classification provides access to necessary services, financial resources, and certain legal protections that would not be guaranteed if equines are reclassified as non-livestock. Changing the legal definition of equines from livestock to some other class of animal should not be taken lightly or decided without full consideration of all the potential consequences of that action. The equine industry in New Mexico is diverse, vibrant, and economically important. Future efforts to legally reclassify equines to something other than livestock would significantly change that for the worse.

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